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AUTHOR Richardson, Judy S.
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ABSTRACT

To ascertain what variables contribute to success of adult literacy programs, a study of 107 adult students in a literacy program was undertaken over a period of two years. Program success was defined as an attendance rate of 65%. It was hypothesized that the four characteristics of age, sex, employment, and marital status would be predictors of program success. Specifically, it was predicted that older students who are employed, married with children, and female would be most stable. Analysis of the data indicated no significance for any variables. The four characteristics selected for this study cannot be considered the most important factors for predicting program success. (TJ)

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Judy S. Richardson
Assistant Professor
Georgia State University
Box 340
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

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A CORRELATIONAL STUDY: SUCCESS, STABILITY AND STAYING POWER FOR ADULT BEGINNING READERS

Judy S. Richardson

Georgia State University

Adult beginning readers comprise a significant portion of the American population. Estimates range from 1.4 million total illiteracy to 39 million functional illiteracy (Cook, 1977). Many adult beginning readers have not enrolled in literacy programs; they are a puzzling unknown. Greater concern exists for those who do enroll because they are a known but fickle population, often dropping out before completing programs. This paper identifies some variables which may contribute to attrition

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or success of adult literacy programs and describes a study which attempted to determine the significance of the variables for literacy program attendance.

RATIONALE

A basic, recurring problem for adult educators has been how to define the characteristics and correlaries which indicate stability in literacy programs. Since the study of adult beginning readers is limited, it is necessary to apply from the more general fields of adult psychology and education. A pattern emerges which provides for a description of successful adult learners.

Jung (1939) writes that life consists of polarities; human existence involves bringing a balance to the polarities. This balance, impossible to achieve before middle age, created a self-actualized human being able to define his/her own learning environment. Erikson's (1959) descriptive stages of generativity and integtity provide support for this conflict model approach to learning. Birren (Bischoff, 1965) hypothesizes that adults encounter a process of disengagement or load-shedding: as they age, adults tend to be less involved with others and to make greater use of their mental ability while they become self-reliant and independent.

Maslow (1970) describes the self-actualized adult as one who is oriented realistically, accepts self and others as they are, is autonomous and enjovs privacy. This fulfillment model is also discussed by Rogers (1951) who describes the development of fully functioning persons for whom learning is an internal process, controlled by the learner. Persons learn well that which involves their own maintenance of self.

Buhler (Knox, 1977), presents variables of the life cycle for adults: pre-marriage to expansion stage when self-acceptance may be low (ages 20-30's); consolidation of gains stage when self-acceptance has increased (40's); evaluation stage when stability occurs (50-60's). Richardson (1975), in a clinical study of adult beginning readers, described a pattern similar to Buhler's. She described younger adult beginners (20-30's) as unmarried, in process of defining life goals, often unemployed or transient. Older beginners (40-60's) were married with children, had definite goals, were employed and stable.

McCluskey (Knowles, 1973) discusses the concept of Margin, equal to surplus Power, which adults possess beyond their Load, defined as demands made on a person by self and society. As Load decreases with age, Margin to learn increases. Margin is effected by commitment. Marriage is one example of commitment; employment in a stable occupation may be another.

Farmer's study (1971) of adult learners indicates that women and men may differ in types of continuing educational experiences they seek. Neugarten and Gutmann (1958) found an apparent shift in self-concept from passive to aggressive for older women and the opposite for older men. This shift could imply that sex is a factor in adult learning.

METHOD

While not exhaustive, this review does imply a description of successful adult learners; however, no measurable variables are identified. This study was an attempt to extrapolate variables from the literature applicable to adult beginning readers and to collect the

information for a larger population than would be possible using a clinical interview procedure. The author identified four characteristics which might be predictors of program success. The variables, age, sex, employment, and marital status, seemed reasonable after study of the literature. The information was available in records of adults enrolled in a metro-based literacy program, enabling efficient collection of data.

Program attendance was selected as the criterion for success, since attendance in voluntary literacy programs will drop if the program is not perceived as successful by the adult. An attendance rate of 65 percent or better was identified to specify program success after consultation with the program director and reading specialists.

Records spanning a two year period of 250 day and night students were examined. Because only partial information was recorded for many students, data for only 107 subjects was considered.

A multiple regression analysis was computed to determine predictive value of the dependent variables for the independent variables of program stability.

Expectations, in order of variance, were:

older students
employed
married students with children } would be most stable
females

A separate multiple regression analysis was developed for each of the two criterion variables available: stability as defined by regular or irregular attendance (N=107); stability as defined by 65% or better attendance (N=65).

Analysis of the data indicated no significance for any variables; no correlation even approached significance at the .01 level. The highest ranking variable accounted for only .006 percent of the variance. The four characteristics selected to predict program stability for this adult population cannot be considered indicative. When the dependent variable was defined as regular or irregular attendance, the order of variance attained was:

married students with children
older students
male students
employed students
} approaching stability.

When the dependent variable was defined by percentage of attendance, the order of variance obtained was:

married students with children
older students
male students
employed students
} approaching stability.

The expected order of variance was not obtained. In both cases, employment seemed to have the least influence where it was expected to rank second. Age ranked third or second instead of highest. Marital status ranked second and first rather than third. Sex ranked first and third rather than last.

Some interesting information was gained by reviewing the means. The average student age was 35 years. More males than females attended; participants tended to be employed; the percentage of attendance was only 44%.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results, one must conclude that the identified factors are not the most important criteria for predicting program success in adult reading programs. It is possible that adults who return voluntarily to literacy programs have already achieved those qualities described as developing with age and maturity. The 35 year average may indicate an approaching consolidation of gains stage. Thus, age might not be considered as a predictor in voluntary programs. Satisfaction with employment might be of greater import than employment alone could indicate. Male-femaleness and success at anything is debatable at almost every level today! While stability may develop as a result of marriage and child rearing, this predictor needs redefinition.

It would appear that this study provides a basis for further conjecture and study. Since adult beginning readers possess such varied levels of reading performance and motivation as well as varied personal goals for reading success, collecting concrete data concerning vital statistics may not provide a great deal of insight. Future studies should define the type of program in question; voluntary programs will alter the nature of investigation. Program stability may not be the most descriptive measure of success. Success may need to be defined differently for each individual. It is possible that a person who attends 44% of the time is successful at gaining the level of literacy s/he desires. Some measure of intelligence might be an important factor in determining success.

If "attitude is the hidden variable of the literacy program" (Cook, 1977: 122), clinical interviews seem to be the best vehicle for determining that attitude, motivation, and articulation of individual success. Although time consuming, interviews in conjunction with collection of statistical data may provide greater insights for predicting program success.

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